

Domestic Violence—Medieval and Modern

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AS THE WORLD HEALTH

Organization's just-released *World Report on Violence and Health* makes abundantly clear, violence by intimate partners is a worldwide problem with major public health implications.¹ The American Psychological Association has estimated that 4 million American women experience a serious assault by an intimate partner during an average 12-month period.² A study of women visiting emergency rooms found that 54% had been threatened or injured by an intimate partner at some time in their lives and that 24% reported having been injured by their current partner.³

This problem is not a novelty of the modern world; its roots go back to the very foundations of so-called civil society, although the expression and extent of violence varies across periods and cultures. In medieval Europe, for example, husbands had the right to "chastise"—that is, physically discipline—their

wives, servants, and apprentices, although churches and communities also brought significant pressure to bear against these widespread practices.^{4–6}

In this image from a 1582 print edition of the 13th-century *Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum* (Salernitan Regimen of Health), we catch a glimpse of a domestic assault as it was frequently represented in medieval and early modern Europe.⁷ Here it was assumed that the matter was individual and largely private, the consequence of the hot-tempered "choleric" disposition of an angry and poorly controlled man. Until very recently, domestic violence

was largely excluded from public scrutiny. These attitudes have begun to change, a process that the publication of the World Health Organization's report should help accelerate. ■

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In honor of Jane Eliot Sewell, historian and friend (1959–2002).

References

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Source. Prints and Photographs Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.